FACT SHEET

Talks on Oct. 11, 1951, were initially frustrating for the United Nations Command, but a 30-day truce was agreed to on Nov. 27, 1951.

Second Korean Winter

November 28, 1951 - April 30, 1952

The 30-Day Truce

On Nov. 27, 1951, after five months of often-heated negotiations to end the Korean War, representatives of the United Nations Command (UNC) and their Communist Chinese and North Korean adversaries agreed on a line of demarcation for the prospective armistice. The proposed line, which followed the existing front between the opposing forces, ran from a point near Kosong on the eastern coast south to the "Punchbowl," a circular valley surrounded by heights ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 feet. It then turned west to the "Iron Triangle," the highly-fortified Ch'orwon-Kumhwa-P'yonggang area in the center of the front, and finally southwest to the point south of Panmunjom where the Hant'an River flowed into the Yellow Sea. This line would serve as the dividing line during the truce provided the two sides reached an armistice within 30 days.

An armistice seemed just around the corner, and Eighth U.S. Army commander Lieutenant General James A. Van Fleet sought to show the United Nations' good faith toward the talks by directing his commanders to reduce operations to the lowest level essential to maintain their positions. They were to keep losses to a minimum and limit offensive action to counterattacks necessary to regain crucial terrain lost to the enemy. In effect, the UNC decided against further offensive operations unless the communists broke off negotiations or the talks bogged down. As a frigid winter swept across the Korean peninsula, the United Nations and communist forces settled down to a static, positional war. The U.N. forces enjoyed a

relative advantage in their location on the more sunny southern side of the hills and mountains, although they still needed to closely follow cold weather procedures to survive the arctic blasts. They also benefited from a more substantial, logistical infrastructure that, by the winter of 1951-52, kept a steady stream of supplies flowing to the front. The Chinese and North Koreans used the lull to develop an extensive defense in depth by digging lines of interconnected trenches with dugouts protected by logs, rocks and sand that could withstand anything but a direct hit. The extensive trenches, static front, emphasis on artillery and mortar fire and constant patrols and raids reminded observers of the Western Front in World War I. Yet American troop morale remained relatively high, partly because of a rotation policy that permitted soldiers to return to the United States after nine months of combat duty.

On Nov. 30, despite the reduction in combat, F-86 pilots engaged 44 enemy aircraft over the island of Taewha-do, off North Korea's west coast, in one of the largest aerial battles of the war. The 4th Fighter/Intercept Group pilots destroyed 12 communist planes and damaged three others without loss.

Through December 1951, during the 30-day period provided by the agreement, the UNC made no tactically significant moves on the main front beyond the relief of the 1st Cavalry Division by the 45th Infantry Division. The Eighth Army did not even interfere with the enemy's efforts to strengthen his defenses. For their part, the communists limited their activities to platoon- and company-sized attacks on outposts. To keep his troops sharp, Van Fleet ordered his commanders to send out frequent patrols to snatch prisoners, but these patrols yielded only 247 captures – a relatively paltry total. With the main front inactive, Van Fleet sent a Korean task force to hunt down guerrillas operating against United Nations lines of communication, particularly in the mountainous Chiri-san region of southwest Korea.

Stalemate

When the 30-day limit expired Dec. 27, U.N. Commander in Chief General Matthew B. Ridgway, questioned Van Fleet on his plans to resume the offensive. By this time, however, the communists had thoroughly fortified their positions, making any attack a costly proposition. Van Fleet replied he did not contemplate an attack. His commanders viewed minor attacks as costly and without value. Van Fleet added that the United Nations line was a strong one and could be held by the Eighth Army against all foreseeable attacks. When the Joint Strategic Plans and Operations Group of Ridgway's staff examined a proposal for an offensive to the P'yongyang-Wonsan line, it estimated that it would cost 200,000 United Nations casualties. Nor did the Air Force and Navy like the idea. The Air Force thought the proposed advance would take the U.N. forces too close to enemy air bases in Manchuria, while the Navy was concerned about exposing its naval vessels and amphibious forces to heavy air attacks from bases in North Korea. Finally, no one could predict the reaction of the Soviets to a U.N. advance up the peninsula. For the moment, large-scale offensive ventures seemed out of the question.

Consequently, for the rest of the winter and early spring, the action at the front consisted almost entirely of small forays and occasional clashes of patrols, while the Far East Air Forces (FEAF) and other U.N. aircraft flew almost daily close-air support and interdiction missions.

In late January, raids by units of the 45th Infantry Division south of Mabang-ni stirred up a hornet's nest but resulted in no major change in the opposing lines. On the UNC's western flank, the I Corps mounted Project HIGHBOY placing heavy artillery and armored vehicles on top of hills in such a way that they could fire directly onto the formerly impregnable enemy bunkers and fortifications. The direct fire demolished some of the enemy works but did not solve the basic problem.

From Feb. 10-15, the UNC tried Operation CLAM-UP, instituting a moratorium on patrols, artillery fire and air support along the front to draw the communists out of their earthworks into the open terrain where they could be ambushed. But the communists merely took advantage of the lull to strengthen their defenses. The United Nations could do little more than conduct aerial interdiction and naval bombardment missions against communist lines of communication and shift units along the front to concentrate American firepower in the vulnerable western sector and give the South Koreans a larger share of the battle line. From the United Nations perspective, the limited activity did have the positive result of lowering casualties.

United Nations losses had declined from 20,000 casualties in October to 11,000 in November and to 3,000 in December and January. From February through April, they hovered around the 2,500 mark. FEAF began a new, intensified rail interdiction campaign in February 1952. Named SATURATE, this campaign quickly became a race between the airmen attempting to destroy the rail lines and the North Korean laborers trying to repair them. The enemy soon erected formidable anti-aircraft defens-

es, making these rail attacks extremely dangerous.

Offensive Plans Scrapped

While the frontline soldiers conducted their endless patrols, the higher echelons of command considered various plans for offensives only to discard each of them as too costly or adverse to the ongoing truce talks. In early February, Van Fleet's staff prepared BIG STICK, a proposed advance by the U.N.'s western flank to the Yesong River that would result in the capture of Kaesong, destruction of the communist supply complex at Sibyong-ni, and dispersion of four Chinese armies at an estimated cost of 11,000 U.N. casualties.

When this met with little enthusiasm at Ridgway's headquarters, Eighth Army planners drew up a second and more limited design, HOMECOMING, which dropped the amphibious feint on Korea's east coast and the attack toward Sibyong-ni in the original plan but retained the drive to capture Kaesong, beginning April 1. By the end of February, however, the truce negotiations were making some progress, and Ridgway called off any attacks that would increase casualties.

In early April, Van Fleet proposed CHOPSTICK 6 and CHOPSTICK 16. CHOPSTICK 6 proposed an envelopment against the high ground south of P'yongyang by a reinforced South Korean division. CHOPSTICK 16 laid out a two-division attack to drive the enemy from the area southeast of the Nam River in eastern Korea. Ridgway turned down CHOPSTICK 6 but approved CHOPSTICK 16 as long as it did not use any American troops. In any event, Van Fleet suspended the attack indefinitely on April 29, after a new proposal seemed to promise a breakthrough in the talks.

Conclusion

As the planning process indicated, the truce talks drove the strategy and operations from November 1951 to May 1952. The two sides had basically agreed on a demarcation line, but a final settlement proved maddeningly elusive as they sparred over the concrete arrangements for the armistice. Although they agreed on the need for an armistice commission, they clashed over its composition and its access to all of Korea.

In addition, the communists rejected U.N. proposals for the prohibition of airfield construction and demanded the withdrawal of all forces from the coastal and rear areas of the other side – a proposal that clearly would have penalized the U.N. forces more than the Chinese and North Koreans. Despite the wrangling at the bargaining table, however, the UNC remained cautious of any offensives that would adversely affect the progress of the talks. At various times, the negotiators seemed on the verge of a breakthrough. Yet, for all their efforts, another year would pass before a cease-fire halted the fighting on the troubled Korean peninsula.

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